

Patent

What is claimed is:

1. A method for controlling distribution of electronic mail messages communicated from a sender to a received via a communications network, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) receiving a message intended for delivery to a recipient;
- (b) identifying a priority level corresponding to the message;
- (c) identifying a processing rule for the identified priority level; and
- (d) delivering the message to the intended recipient in accordance with the processing rule.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein step (b) is comprises reading data from a header of the message.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein step (c) is performed by referencing a rule base.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein steps (a) through (d) are performed at a client device, the method further comprising the step of:

- (e) transmitting to a network device a preference for receiving messages having the priority level.

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5. The method of claim 1, wherein step (b) comprises the steps of:

- (e) identifying a communications path of the message;
- (f) sampling a plurality of messages sharing the path;
- (g) determining a value for a sender metric;
- (h) identifying a priority level from a rule base for the determined value;

and

- (i) assigning the priority level identified in step (h) to the path.

6. A method for controlling distribution of electronic mail messages communicated from a sender to a receiver via a communications network, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) receiving a message intended for delivery to a recipient;
- (b) identifying a priority level corresponding to the message;
- (c) identifying a prescribed delay for the identified priority level; and
- (d) delivering the message to the intended recipient after the prescribed

delay.

7. A method for controlling distribution of electronic mail messages communicated from a sender to a receiver via a communications network, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) receiving a message intended for delivery to a recipient;
- (b) identifying a priority level corresponding to the message;

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- (c) identifying a processing rule for the identified priority level; and
- (d) delivering the message to the intended recipient in accordance with the processing rule.